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ABSTRACT

Many community college faculty are concerned with academic standards at their institutions, in part because in the late 1960s and during the 1970s standards became associated, in the minds of many teachers and students, with personal rigidity rather than academic rigor. Faculty who wish to re-examine academic standards with their colleagues should: (1) discuss the nature and function of standards that require faculty to teach the subject matter with appropriate rigor and grant passing grades only to students who demonstrate competency in the subject; (2) have a meeting of faculty teaching a multi-section course, sequential courses, or courses within a particular program to review departmental course outlines or departmental syllabi, catalog descriptions, and ways of implementing the course outlines; and revise the materials or methods as deemed appropriate; (3) consider selecting textbooks or grading papers together; (4) sponsor cross-disciplinary discussions of standards to identify the skills and knowledge faculty members can expect of each other's students; (5) involve part-time faculty in discussions and meetings; and (6) accept responsibility for professionalism and professional growth by keeping abreast of developments in one's field, contributing to the institution, and reassessing course material. Having agreed upon standards themselves, faculty can provide uniform information to students about what is expected of them and insure the provision of an appropriate and rigorous education. (LAL)

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THE ACADEMIC SENATE

for California Community Colleges

ACADEMIC STANDARDS: THE FACULTY'S ROLE

An Academic Senate Position Paper:
Discussion and Action

Spring 1983

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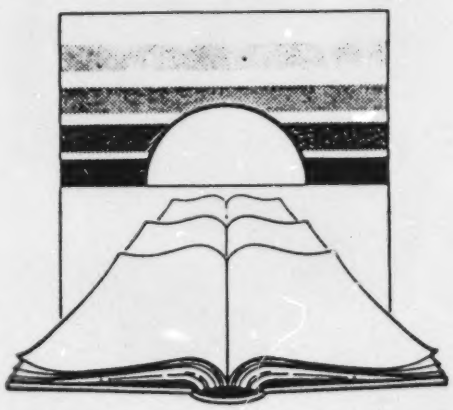

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JC 840 091

ACADEMIC STANDARDS: THE FACULTY'S ROLE

We seem to hear more every day about declining academic standards. In January, the newspapers reported that only about 62 percent of candidates for certificates to teach in California elementary and secondary schools passed tests in basic skills. Many community college faculty are concerned about standards in their institutions, in part because in the late 1960s and the 1970s standards became associated, in the minds of many faculty members and students, with personal rigidity rather than academic rigor.

Today's financial situation has given us different problems, including pressure to retain students regardless of their preparation or performance. A faculty member who wants to have and uphold academic standards may fear losing students to a colleague with lower requirements. Conversely, faculty who see themselves as the last bastions of academe may have unnecessarily and unfairly high standards.

Believing that many faculty may want to re-examine academic standards with their colleagues, the Educational Policies Committee of the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges offers the following suggestions.

DISCUSS THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF ACADEMIC STANDARDS WITH YOUR COLLEAGUES.

Get together with others in your academic department or in a larger group through the local academic senate and examine what academic standards mean. Make it clear that academic freedom means that facutly can express controversial opinions without being persecuted for doing so; academic standards require faculty to teach the subject matter with appropriate rigor and to grant passing grades only to students who demonstrate competency in the subject. Talk with your colleagues about fairness to the students, too. Students need to know that Spanish 1 will prepare them for Spanish 2; if it doesn't, the people who teach those two classes need to discuss their standards. Remember, a student who receives a D or F in a class can repeat it--in fact, should repeat it--but a student who receives a C cannot repeat except under special circumstances. If a student is not ready for the next course, a grade of C is no favor.

HAVE A MEETING OF FACULTY WITHIN A DISCIPLINE.

Get together the faculty teaching a multi-section course or sequential courses, or courses in a particular program. (The administration doesn't have to call the

meeting; faculty may prefer to get together on their own.) Review the departmental course outlines or departmental syllabi, which state officially what each course covers. If the outlines are outdated, revise them; if there aren't any outlines, write some. (They are required by law.) This would also be a good time to review catalog course descriptions and to recommend changes, including removing courses which are no longer taught. Talk about how to implement the course outlines, discussing textbook selection; grading standards; number, size, and type of assignments; and methods of instruction. Everyone doesn't have to do exactly the same thing, but there should be similarity in the amount and difficulty of work required of students in different sections of the same course. Some departments may want to write course objectives stating what students in each course should be able to do at the end of the semester if they are to pass.

CONSIDER SELECTING TEXTBOOKS OR GRADING PAPERS TOGETHER.

Doing this even once would be enlightening. Some faculty might want to team teach. Have follow-up discussions, too, to explain how decisions worked out and to look together for solutions to problems. Sit in on a colleague's class, or

invite a colleague to sit in on yours.

SPONSOR CROSS-DISCIPLINARY DISCUSSIONS OF STANDARDS.

Math and science faculty, history and English faculty could discuss what skills and knowledge they can and should expect of each other's students. If some departments require term papers but no one teaches how to write them, students are being hurt; maybe a new course should be developed or an existing one changed. If there is only one person teaching a subject, he or she could discuss standards with others in a related area. In vocational fields, the local employers can provide information about what prospective employees need to know. Schools which receive our transfer students will have information about what skills our students may be lacking. Use outside information as a guide to whether departmental standards need to be changed.

INVOLVE PART-TIME FACULTY.

Part-time faculty, especially new part-timers, may not know what to expect of students in some classes or what students will need to know in subsequent classes. Set up a system so new part-timers are each assigned to someone who

has been at the school a while, probably a full-time faculty member who can serve as a resource person. Since part-time faculty typically are paid only for hours spent in class, try to get some money so part-timers can be paid for several hours each semester to meet with other faculty. It might even be possible to have an all-day meeting of all faculty in a department, with classes dismissed, to discuss standards.

ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY FOR PROFESSIONALISM.

Engage in professional growth activities, whether or not your school requires you to do so. These activities include taking refresher courses, making visits to other schools or research sites, reading professional journals, attending conferences, carrying out research, and generally keeping current in your field. Faculty are supposed to be self-motivated and self-regulating. Also, contribute to the institution by serving on committees; help your students by having office hours and being available during them. Finally, periodically reassess the validity of the material you're teaching. We need to have standards of our own before we can honestly impose standards on our students. If you or

some of your colleagues are less than professional, it's your responsibility to become professional.

We're all going to teach like individual people. Sharing standards won't turn us into automatons. What it will do is assure us and our students that we do have programs, that Economics 1 prepares one for Economics 2, that a student who failed X's political science class would probably have failed Y's class, and that we mean it when we say that certain classes require certain skills and teach certain other skills.

When we have agreed with our colleagues about our standards, we can tell our students on the first day of the semester what those standards are without having to fear a mass exodus across the hall to the class of a colleague (whose standards may be low because he or she has the same fear). And we should tell our students what our standards are: how many papers, tests, reports, and/or experiments are required; how many hours they will have to spend on homework; how well they will have to perform to pass the course; what they will know when they do pass the course. The students will be reassured because our expectations of them will be defined; and we will know that we are providing an appropriate and rigorous education.

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